

## **Building capabilities for higher education prior to entry**

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# Building Capabilities for Higher Education Prior to Entry

## Abstract

Inequality of participation in higher education persists despite a wealth of research and interventions. This has led to calls to rethink what it means to be university ready, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds many of whom are first-generation students. This paper explores the efficacy of a unique widening participation model based on immersing learners in the university environment prior to entry to HE in Scotland. Data from interviews with 30 students who participated in the programme are mapped to Wilson-Strydom's Framework for Equitable Transitions to University (2016) which is based on the Capability Approach. Capability theorists contend that an appropriate approach to widening participation would address what students need to be able to do and to be (their capabilities) to successfully make the transition to HE. Evidence from this study suggests that the experience of studying HE level qualifications within a university setting whilst still at school provides learners from disadvantaged backgrounds with the capabilities for an equitable transition to university. A key finding is that when capabilities for equitable transitions are fostered prior to entry, learners identify as university students. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge at the nexus of widening participation, transition, and capabilities.

Keywords: Capabilities; Readiness; Identity; Transition; Widening Participation, Scotland.

## 1. Introduction

Central to the discourse on widening participation is the concept of readiness for higher education (HE), (Conley, 2007; Gigliotti, 2012). This is especially the case for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds many of whom are first-generation students (Pike and Kuh, 2005). Students from first-generation and low-income backgrounds are among the least likely to be retained through to degree completion (Thayer, 2000). The dominant discourse on successful transitions into and through university relies on the ability of the student to adapt (or not) to the institution. (Wayne et al. 2016). This view is challenged, however, by authors who express concern regarding the ability of non-traditional students to successfully navigate major transitions without overt mechanisms and interventions (Hussey and Smith 2010, Leese, 2010, McKay and Devlin 2014, Scutter et al. 2011). For students from diverse backgrounds, therefore, there is a need for planned and deliberate support to underpin transition to university.

This paper examines the findings from a study which explored the transitional experiences of learners who undertook a unique year-long transition programme studying Scottish Advanced Highers, typically delivered in school, in a university. The programme aims to immerse learners in HE before university entry so that pupils become familiar with the HE learning environment thus supporting their progression. Interviews were carried out with 30 learners who had undertaken the programme and had since progressed to degree study at university.

The analysis draws on the capability approach first described by Sen (1980) and developed by Nussbaum and Sen (1993).

The paper begins with a synopsis of the local policy context of widening participation to HE followed by an overview of the literature around the capability approach as this has been applied to HE. The study's methodology is described before findings are reported and analysed according to Wilson-Strydom's list of Capabilities for Equitable Transition (Wilson-Strydom, 2016). Findings are critically discussed in light of the use of the [framework](#), [literature](#) and policy context before concluding remarks are proffered. The Scottish example is relevant to the international audience in terms of the importance of fostering capabilities for equitable HE transitions prior to entry. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge at the nexus of widening participation, transition, and capabilities.

The study's research question evolved from the aim of the evaluation which was to address the efficacy of this immersive experience from the learner perspective.

Research question:

*To what extent does immersion within a university learning environment prior to entry foster capabilities for an equitable transition to HE?*

## **2. [Scottish](#) policy and context**

Although higher levels of HE participation have been achieved in recent years, figures show that 18-year olds from Scotland's 20% *least* deprived communities are more than four times

as likely to enter university as those from the 20% *most* deprived communities (Commission on Widening Access, 2016). This is the case despite the fact that home-domiciled students receive free university tuition to study in Scotland, unlike students in the rest of the U.K. In Scotland, widening participation to HE has therefore taken on a new prominence and is linked largely to the movement into university of the most disadvantaged students, represented in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). In 2011, the Scottish government's white paper sought to address support for progression to Higher Education for pupils from schools in the lowest deprivation quintile of the SIMD (Scottish Government, 2011). Activity, it argued, should be targeted on those pupils who are at risk of not achieving and those who are achieving but who do not recognise the benefits of progressing to HE.

In Scotland, the 'Higher' qualification remains the 'gold standard' for university entry (Scottish Government, 2018). However, Advanced Highers, where studied, are becoming a condition of entry and, in some cases, can facilitate direct entry to year two of the four-year Scottish degree (UCAS, 2018a). Advanced Highers are also required for most HE providers in the rest of the U.K. While Advanced Highers are traditionally delivered in school, they occupy the same Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) level as the starting point of Scottish higher education, SCQF Level 7 (SQA, 2018).

The Advanced Higher was added to the suite of school qualifications in 1999 to build on the Higher qualification. Its purpose is to develop learners' knowledge and understanding of key concepts and to enable learners to interpret, critically analyse, evaluate and reflect on information more effectively. There is also a greater emphasis on skills development, including higher-order (critical) thinking, research, extended essay-writing and independent study skills. The aim is to provide a solid basis for progression to HE while developing

learners with a more mature approach to study that will help sustain success at degree study and beyond. As such the Advanced Higher lends itself to delivery within the university environment.

Many schools struggle to provide a full range of Advanced Higher subjects to their final year pupils for a variety of reasons including small pupil numbers, timetabling constraints and lack of teacher expertise or resources ([UCAS, 2018b](#)). Glasgow Caledonian University established the Advanced Higher Hub as an access model in 2013. The aim was to provide a year-long immersion and transition programme to deliver Advanced Highers (HE level study) which are typically taught in school, in a university setting. The Hub targets S6 (final year) school pupils from local secondary schools which fall within the 20% most deprived local areas. The current average HE progression rate for pupils in these schools is 19%, significantly below the average for Glasgow City Council schools (29%) and the Scottish sector average for state-funded secondary schools (37%) (Scottish Funding Council, 2013). The Hub is located on the university campus. School pupils have associate student status and access to all university facilities. Pupils spend up to 18 hours per week studying Advanced Highers within the university learning environment. Learners use their Advanced Higher qualifications to apply to HE institutions the length and breadth of the U.K. and beyond.

In addition to providing fair access to Advanced Highers, the rationale for the Hub was that school pupils would become familiar with the HE learning environment, which in turn would support their progression to and retention in Higher Education. This paper explores the efficacy of this model.

### 3. Capabilities for Higher Education

Employing the lens of the Capability Approach to HE is highlighted in an emerging body of literature (Walker, 2006; Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010; Hart, 2012; Hedge and MacKenzie, 2012). Central to the discourse is Sen's idea that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities. Agency is therefore fundamental to the approach and is defined as the ability to act according to what one values. The Capability Approach also emphasises the need for conditions that enable human functionings. The Capability Approach is not a theory of social justice, but rather a normative framework that can be used to guide understandings of individual well-being and social arrangements in a manner that explicitly supports social justice (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009). Boni and Walker (2013) propose that HE has the transformative power to form people's capabilities and this is how HE contributes to the common good. That is, the Capability Approach provides a framework which is sensitive to diverse social settings and groups and, while the capability approach does not *explain* the causes of educational inequality, it provides a tool with which to *conceptualise* and *evaluate* them (Unterhalter et al. 2007).

The Capability Approach challenges human capital theory's narrow focus on the economic value of education - that education is relevant in so far as it develops skills and knowledge as an investment in the productivity of individuals as workers (Robeyns, 2006). Based on human development theory, instead, the Capability Approach focuses on what a person can do and be in making meaningful choices from a range of options; hence, having the freedom to choose a life they have reason to value (Sen, 1999). Several authors (Robeyns 2003, Walker, 2006, Wilson-Strydom, 2016) have made use of the capability framework for

researching education which has led to the development of lists of capabilities for HE.

However, there are few examples within the research on HE capabilities involving learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Capability Approach is not, however, without its critics. Pogge (2002), for example, suggests that its focus tends to conceal the economic inequalities which resource-based theories make transparent. Pogge also contends that the capability approach stigmatises those with fewer, or less valued capabilities while Kelly (2010) has criticised the method for its perfectionism. Others have criticised the approach as positioning learners in a deficit model when it is used to analyse the situations of ‘deprived people’ and create interventions that give them access to necessary resources to make choices (Alkire, 2002). However, as Clark notes, the CA recognises individual heterogeneity and diversity (through differences in personal conversion functions), drawing attention to group disparities, embracing human agency and participation and acknowledging that different people, cultures and societies may have different values and aspirations (Clark, 2005; Deneulin and Shahani, 2009). As such, the CA cannot be described as a deficit approach.

Developing theoretical lists of capabilities is also a contested area. While Sen (1984) provides examples of intrinsically valuable capabilities, he does not subscribe to a fixed or definitive list that counts as an overall indicator of well-being and quality of life. Instead, he argues that the selection and weighting of capabilities depend on personal value judgements which are partly influenced by the nature and purpose of the evaluative exercise. This refusal has led to criticism relating to the limitations of Sen’s framework (Sugden, 1993). Nussbaum (2003) has criticised Sen for failing to provide such a list and goes on to develop her list of capabilities for human flourishing and a life of dignity arguing that, ‘If capabilities are to be



used in advancing a conception of social justice, they will obviously have to be specified.’  
(Nussbaum, 2003:17).

Following Nussbaum, Walker (2006) has developed a list of capabilities for HE in an attempt to provoke dialogue about what HE pedagogies might look like if they adopted a capabilities framework. She cautions, however, that we cannot separate the relative importance of particular HE capabilities since these overlap. Wilson-Strydom (2016) has further developed Walker’s original list to produce a list of capabilities for the *transition* to HE, taking as a starting point, “what it means to be ‘university ready’ ...” She contends that her list provides the foundation for a normative framework for understanding the demands students face during this complex transition which would not be possible when focusing only on measurable performance and academic readiness. Both lists are theoretical, to be adapted and revised in specific contexts. For example, Wilson-Strydom’s list was developed in the context of transition to HE in South Africa. In the current study, the methodological approach is to apply this work to the Scottish context to evaluate the efficacy of the Hub model in preparing learners for HE. While Sen himself recognised that the CA is not sufficient for all evaluative purposes as it does not provide a complete theory of justice, none-the-less, the approach offers a useful framework for evaluating certain key capabilities required for successful transitions to and participation in HE.

#### **4. Methodology**

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of the Hub from the learner perspective. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted. In-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews were

conducted with a total of 30 participants who had attended the Hub whilst still at school and who had since progressed to university and started their degrees (19 female, 11 male). Most (17) interviewees were first-year students while eight were second-year and five were third-year students. Participants were engaged in a range of different degree programmes at a total of 8 universities U.K. wide although most students were based in Scotland (N= 28).

Participants were self-selecting, from a list provided by the Hub staff, of former Hub pupils about whom post-school destinations were known. Given the numbers progressing through the Hub each year, it was not possible to recruit sufficient numbers of participants from any one cohort of former Hub pupils. To this extent, the sample could be described as a ‘convenience sample’. Ethical approval for the study was granted.

Participants had attended the Hub because their respective schools were unable to offer the Advanced Higher(s) they sought either in preparation for university-level study or because these are required for entry to high demand degree courses.

Twenty-six participants (87% of the study sample) came from the 40% most deprived areas of Scotland (as measured by the SIMD) while twenty participants (67% of the sample) came from the 20% most deprived areas<sup>1</sup>. Twenty-one participants (70%) were the first-generation to attend university. The need to take cognisance of the transitional experiences, challenges and career approaches of first-generation students is highlighted in emerging literature (see, for example: Leese, 2010, McKay and Devlin, 2014, Pasero, 2016).

An overview of the study sample is provided in table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> SIMD 40 includes SIMD 20. That is, the most deprived 40% includes the most deprived 20%.

**Table 1: Overview of Study Sample**

<b>Study Sample Characteristics</b>	
Number of participants (university students who had attended the Hub whilst still at school prior to the transition to university)	30
Proportion of participants whose schools could not offer Advanced Higher(s) in the desired subject(s)	100%
Proportion of participants from the 40% most deprived areas (MD40)	87%*
Proportion of participants from the 20% most deprived areas (MD20)	67%*
First-generation to attend university	20 (70%)**
Progression to HE rates:	
Participants' schools	19%
Glasgow City Council schools	29%
Scottish sector average (state-funded secondary schools)	37%
Gender	19 females; 11 males
University attended	University of Glasgow: 10 Glasgow Caledonian University: 8 University of Strathclyde: 5 Stirling University: 1 Dundee University: 3 University of Edinburgh: 1 University of York: 1 University of Oxford: 1
Year of university study	1 <sup>st</sup> year: 16 2 <sup>nd</sup> year: 9 3 <sup>rd</sup> year: 5
Degree discipline area	Social sciences: 5 Arts: 4 Law: 4 Engineering: 4 Bio-medical sciences: 3 Pharmacy: 3 Medicine: 2 Social work: 2 Mathematics: 1 Optometry: 1 Dentistry: 1

\*It should be noted that these figures refer to the study cohort of 30 participants and are not necessarily reflective of all Hub participants

\*\*Defined as: neither parent attended university

Interview questions covered a range of areas relating to the students' experiences of studying at the Hub whilst still at school and their subsequent experiences of the transition to university. Interviews were transcribed and data was mapped to a priori themes from Wilson-Strydom's list<sup>2</sup> of capabilities for an equitable transition. In this way, the Wilson-Strydom framework was used as an analytical framework for evaluation. This list was chosen in preference to Walker's as it builds on Walker's list of HEE capabilities by way of offering definitions for an ideal list of capabilities for the *transition* to university. In this way, the applicability of the list (developed in the South African context) can be tested in the Scottish context. Wilson-Strydom's list of capabilities for an equitable transition to HE includes: practical reason; knowledge and imagination; learning disposition; social relations and social networks; respect, dignity and recognition; and emotional health. These are defined in the findings section.

The study's methodology is limited to an extent in that data collected via the interviews relied on students' reflections of the programme and its impact on their HE transition one, two or, in some cases three, years after the experience.

## 5. Findings

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<sup>2</sup> An additional capability, 'Being able to understand, read, write and speak confidently in the language of instruction', was not deemed appropriate for inclusion the context of this study where students are typically first language English speakers.

Data from student interviews were analysed in terms of the extent to which evidence of key capabilities for an equitable transition was evident, what the enablers of these capabilities were and to what extent these capabilities support agency. **For anonymity and confidentiality, participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.**

**5.1 Practical reason:** *Being able to make well-reasoned, informed, critical, independent and reflective choices about post-school study.*

All 30 participants reported that the Hub helped them to confirm their aspirations. Twenty-three participants wanted to study at the Hub because they thought it would be useful preparation for university as well as an opportunity to ‘test out’ the workload. Also, a minority of students (N=7) were studying Advanced Highers because the subjects were either encouraged or required at that level for university entry for their chosen degree courses: medicine, dentistry and universities in England or abroad. Emma explained her reasons for participating in the Hub:

‘I knew that I wanted to be a doctor. Due to teacher shortages and lack of resources our school could not offer me the Advanced Highers I needed for these subjects so I came to the Hub.’

(Emma, Medical student)

In response to a question about how things would be different had the opportunity to attend the programme not been available, for some participants, the chance to gain Advanced Highers was described as ‘life-changing’, as Dentistry student Stuart’s words demonstrate:

‘I certainly wouldn’t be doing dentistry – some college course maybe. It wouldn’t just have been different it would have been impossible for me to do what I wanted.

(Stuart, Dentistry student)

Most participants pursued the degree programme they had had in mind before starting at the Hub. For a minority of participants, however, the experience led to a change in direction subject-wise. Politics student Andrew reflects on his journey:

‘I had been toying with the idea of doing Accountancy at university. Had I not been able to study Modern Studies at Advanced Higher I might well have opted for Accountancy which wouldn’t have been the right career choice for me.’

(Andrew, Politics student)

All those participants who studied science subjects and who went on to study science-related degree subjects (N=11) said their degree choice was confirmed by the Hub experience, especially in terms of the laboratory work where they felt engaged. Angela explains the impact of this experience:

‘I realised I enjoyed carrying out practical work when taking Advanced Higher Biology and experiencing university labs. This helped me decide on biomedical sciences as a course as I knew I’d enjoy the practical side.’

(Angela, Biomedical Science student)

For those students who had moved away from home to go to university (N=8), the Hub experience acted as a stepping stone as Kirsty explains:

‘Hardly anyone from my school goes away from home to university, so I had to make friends and get to know other people all over again. Knowing that I had already managed to make friends at the Hub was encouraging.’

(Kirsty, Psychology student).

**5.2 Knowledge and imagination:** *Having the academic grounding for chosen university subjects, being able to develop and apply methods of critical thinking and imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives and complex problems.*

Having the academic grounding for their chosen university subjects and being able to develop and apply methods of critical thinking and imagination was evident in participants' reports of the skills developed through the study of Advanced Highers within a university setting. These ranged from research skills such as information gathering and data analysis to critical analysis skills including critical thinking, presenting an argument and problem-solving. Academic writing skills reported included: note-taking, essays and reports, lab reports, dissertation writing and referencing. Other skills learned included: handling scientific equipment; public speaking; presentation skills; exam skills and online learning. Participants reported that the opportunity to complete a dissertation or research project (a requirement of all Advanced Highers) as part of their final assessment involved both the background knowledge of the subject area as well the imagination to develop and complete a substantial piece of research as Laura explains:

'I was able to practice writing to a more complex degree. The dissertation was very useful in terms of moving on to university as it is encouraging to know that the one I will complete in my 4<sup>th</sup> year will not be my first attempt – unlike some, I've had practice!'

(Laura, Law student)

Developing the imagination to identify and comprehend multiple perspectives and complex problems was evident from participants' comments. Gaining a greater sense of academic

independence, feeling motivated to learn, having curiosity and a desire for learning, increased motivation and self-efficacy, as Craig's words demonstrate:

‘Studying Advanced Higher English made me evaluate and just look at everything in life with more depth and enhanced my inquisitiveness, thirst for knowledge and understanding.’

(Craig, Social Science student)

**5.3 Learning disposition:** *Having curiosity and a desire for learning, having the learning skills required for university and being an active inquirer (questioning disposition).*

In response to a question about how the university learning experience was different from that which participants were used to at school, twenty-one interviewees (70% of the sample) mentioned developing as independent learners. Participants stressed this as a factor which promoted feelings of studenthood and which helped their transition to university. Alison's comments emphasise the importance of self-directed learning:

‘It gives you the self-discipline to learn. If you have this discipline already then you are given the trust to use and develop it; if you don't have it, you acquire it there. Self-discipline is an essential skill for university.’

(Alison, Science student)

Being encouraged to become independent learners within the university setting was contrasted with participants' learning experience at school. Sitting in on lectures to encourage



note-taking skills and having more online learning also promoted independent learning which prepared learners for HE. Craig comments on this distinction:

‘I can’t emphasise enough the sense of independence it gives you. It’s like a trial run of uni. In school, you are spoon fed all the time – told what to write down and what to study. At the Hub, we learned self-discipline. We had to develop our style of note taking.’

(Craig, Social Science student)

For those participants who had completed Advanced Highers at school and the Hub simultaneously (N=12), teaching at the Hub was reported to be different from the teaching of the Advanced Highers in target schools with more emphasis on independent learning and preparation ahead of classes and more interaction and discussion within classes. Teaching on campus was often described as being more like university tutorials than school classes. The ‘flipped classroom’ approach (See, for example, Mazur, 1997, Baker, 2001) meant that pupils were expected to complete work ahead of the teaching of a topic. This approach was said to foster independent learning, motivation and self-discipline, as Jen describes:

‘You had to go away and source materials, do your reading and come up with a presentation for the group which was followed by a discussion. In that way, it’s much the same as a tutorial.’

(Jen, Law student)

University facilities and resources were deemed essential to being able to develop academically and professionally. Alison’s comments give a sense of this:

‘At school, the focus was all on exams. They didn’t have a lot of science equipment, and we hardly did any experiments. You need certain skills if you’re going to be a scientist – you need proper equipment and the experience of doing experiments to develop the right skills.’

(Alison, Science student)

Participants were clear that it is the independent learning that distinguished the university learning experience from their school experience and which was a prerequisite for university study.

#### **5.4 Social relations and social networks:** *Being able to participate in groups for*

*learning, working with diverse others to solve problems or complete task; being able to form networks of friendships for learning support and leisure.*

All 30 interviewees highlighted social skills developed via the social relations and networks encouraged at the Hub. For example, working in groups or pairs with new people helped to build confidence in speaking and presenting ideas and arguments in front of others. These social skills were deemed of relevance for meeting new people at university and in particular, for those moving away from home to attend university. Friendships developed at the Hub carried on beyond the studying of Advanced Highers and into university as Andrew's experience highlights:

‘Some of my best friends I met at the Hub. We have a Facebook group which consists largely of ex-Hubbers and a group of us also play 5-a-side football together, some are at different universities, but we all met at the Hub.’

(Andrew, Politics student)

The experience of having to make new friends was considered a foundation for meeting new people at university and collaborative working was one vehicle which fostered a feeling of confidence in participants' ability to learn. Zak explains:

'It's mostly the social aspect, meeting new folk from different schools; being thrown immediately into labs where we had to work in pairs or groups with completely new people. We were encouraged to share what we were doing and to discuss our findings and to help each other out.'

(Zak, Engineering student)

**5.5 Respect, dignity and recognition:** *Having respect for oneself and for others, and receiving respect from others, being treated with dignity; not being devalued or devaluing others' because of one's gender, social class, religion or race; valuing diversity and being able to show empathy. Having a voice to participate in learning.*

Respect, dignity and recognition were evident in comments about supportive relationships with both staff and peers. Less formal relationships with teaching staff than those participants were used to at school were frequently highlighted and were reported to lead to increased feelings of independence and responsibility. Alison's words reveal the difference:

'Being treated with respect and trusted to manage our own time and not being spoken to like children any more is a great way to get used to the independence and responsibility you feel at university.'

(Alison, Science student)

The less formal, friendly learning environment was emphasised time and again and contrasted with the general atmosphere at school, as Hannah describes:

‘It’s a different staff-to-student dynamic to that at school; it’s more friendly and adult, less formal. We were treated more like adults, as students, we used the teachers’ first names; we weren’t spoon fed, and there was an expectation to study on your own.’

(Hannah, Pharmacy student)

Supportive relationships with peers were deemed just as necessary in terms of fostering a sense of belonging in Higher Education as Patrick explains:

‘Getting to know a host of new people who were happy to talk about more intellectual stuff such as politics helped and made me feel like I belonged.’

(Patrick, Social Science student)

#### **5.6 Emotional health:** *Not being subject to anxiety or fear that diminishes learning;*

*having confidence in one’s ability to learn.*

Participants contrasted their on-campus experience with that of school in terms of the university culture and environment. What was reported to be different was the opportunity to be around like-minded people; the friendly learning environment and supportive relationships with staff, peers and current students. This led to increased confidence which was the most reported personal outcome (N=30, 100%). Increased independence was reported by 83% (N=25) of participants. In addition to feeling confident with the level of work and the

workload required for university study, the increase in confidence was attributed to the social side of the Hub and in particular meeting new people.

Participants reported increased feelings of self-efficacy and acceptance from early on in their experience at the Hub. Being around other like-minded people contributed to this, especially being around others who wanted to learn and for whom learning was important. This came as a surprise for many, including Megan:

‘Suddenly you're in this environment, and you're meeting all these new people who are like-minded, and it's like, ‘Oh you like Maths too? That's cool.’ This had never happened to me before. It's a kind of acceptance.’

(Megan, Pharmacy student)

The feeling of acceptance generated by being around like-minded people within a culture where learning is encouraged and valued was powerfully expressed by one student who reflected that had this environment not been available to her the transition to university would have been a ‘huge leap’:

‘Students are smart, right? This is the key thing; you’re not going to feel like a student if you don’t feel smart and you’re not going to feel smart unless it’s ok to be smart. The Hub gives you that environment.’

(Claire, Engineering student).

The transformational impact of the immersive university experience was highlighted by Social Work student Evie who summed up what the experience had meant to her:

‘It gave me the confidence to make friends with strangers and the self-worth to know that university is for me.’

(Evie, Social Work student)

The pastoral care provided on campus was additional to that provided to pupils at school and in some cases, made the difference between progressing to university or not, as Claire explained:

‘I had personal issues going on in which were impacting on my stress levels. I nearly gave up, and I don’t think I’d be at university now if it hadn’t been for the amazing support I got from the staff at the Hub.’

(Claire, Engineering student).

## **6. Impact: supporting the transition to HE**

All participants (N=30) agreed that studying Advanced Highers at the Hub had helped to prepare them for their respective degree courses at university and that the university facilities and resources added to the student experience and preparation for university, in particular, the university library. Those participants who had studied science subjects (N=12) reported that the resources and facilities in the science laboratories enhanced their learning experience. Obtaining the academic skills associated with Advanced Highers, however, on their own, was insufficient to aid the progression to university in a significant way. Key factors influencing the preparation for the transition to university include the development of independent learning and personal and social skills which were fostered through the immersive experience

in university. All participants (N=30) stated that transition to university would have been different without the Hub experience – more of a ‘step’, ‘jump’ or ‘leap.’ The cumulative effect of gaining the capabilities for HE prior to entry had a significant impact on both the participants’ sense of belonging in HE and on identifying as students prior to entry, as Claire summed up:

‘The whole experience made me feel like I belonged there like I was already a student.’

(Claire, Engineering student).

Twenty-six (87%) of participants reported that the intellectual transition from school ‘pupil’ to university ‘student’ started at the Hub. When asked to describe what factors contributed to this distinction participants described travelling to and from school or home to university and not having to wear the school uniform. They remarked that teaching and learning was more akin to tutorials. They frequently mentioned being treated as adults, as students, with respect and being allowed more responsibility. They felt that they were trusted to study. They enjoyed having student cards, meeting new people, being surrounded by like-minded people, mingling with current students and using the university facilities. Becoming an independent learner was the most cited factor responsible for the development of a learner identity as an HE student:

‘It’s the independent learning that makes you feel like a student plus the more adult, less formal relationship you learn to develop with the staff.’

(Alison, Science student).

Notably, attending the Hub whilst still at school was, at times, testing. This included the challenges associated with what participants described as the ‘step up’ in level in terms of the demands of the Advanced Higher learning and workload. In addition, some participants described being tired or ‘stressed’ at times on their ‘Hub days’ as they had to travel to the University following a full day of school work to attend the after-school Hub sessions which run from 4 p.m. to 6.30 p.m. then make their way home and still have time to eat a meal and start homework for the following day. It is also worth noting the potential challenges involved in developing programmes such as the one described here. A considerable amount of planning was required in advance of receiving the first cohort of school pupils onto campus. Key to the success of the programme has been the development of working relations and communication links with partner schools, including providing daily updates regarding attendance or any concerns about pupils.

## **7. Discussion**

This study **provides some understanding of** the link between the capabilities required to be university ready and successful HE student transitions for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Immersing school pupils in the university learning environment to study HE level qualifications was the mechanism which both provided equitable access to Advanced Highers **and helped to develop** key capabilities for a successful transition. Providing learners with access to the Advanced Highers they would not otherwise have been able to study is the main aim of the Hub development. High demand degree programmes such as medicine and dentistry now require Advanced Highers for entry. Also, in some instances, Advanced Highers may give direct entry to the second year of the four-year Scottish degree.



Moreover, learners applying for degree courses in the rest of the UK typically require Advanced Highers for admission since, in terms of equivalence, the qualification is regarded as the same as the A level. Furthermore, the opportunity to study Advanced Highers provides pupils with an opportunity to test out the level and workload of first-year university work since, under the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework, Advanced Highers are equivalent in terms of level (SCQF level 7). Thus, providing fair access to Advanced Highers goes some way to address the inequality of opportunity inherent in the Scottish Higher Education system. Effecting equitable access is not, however, a straightforward matter of closing the school attainment gap. As Dame Ruth Silver pointed out in her introduction to the final report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016), achieving fair access is a sophisticated, subtle problem which is, ‘rooted in family homes and local communities, in the complex mix of factors that shape aspiration and in the cultural differences between socioeconomic groups’ (COWA, 2016). On the premise that equal access is a social good, the Commission thus recommends that:

Universities working with schools should take greater responsibility for the development of the pool of applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds by delivering academically based programmes to support highly able learners, who are at risk of not fulfilling their academic potential. (COWA, Recommendation 16)

The Hub model **addresses** this recommendation by offering fair access to Advanced Highers which are not available in partner schools. Furthermore, **evidence from the study suggests that** the model addresses **some of the** cultural differences evident in the way in which students from non-traditional backgrounds experience the transition from those from second-generation families as described by Leese (2010) and McKay and Devlin (2014). While further research is indicated, the study points to the conclusion that immersion in university

whilst still at school can be seen to foster capabilities for the successful transition to HE.

Further research might follow a larger cohort from the Hub in and through university to establish to what extent the capabilities fostered via the Hub impact on student retention and completion. Data could be compared with performance statistics from cohorts from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, who had not participated in the Hub.

The fact that the vast majority (87%) of interviewees said that they made the intellectual transition from school pupil to university student whilst attending the Hub is a significant finding. Asked to reflect on what factors contributed to this distinction, participants reported that it showed them the workload and the level of study (knowledge and imagination), it gave them the confidence that they could manage this and it encouraged them to become independent learners (learning disposition). Becoming an independent learner, in itself, was not, however, deemed sufficient to foster a sense of studenthood. Identifying as HE students was nurtured by being around like-minded people who ‘wanted to learn.’ It was developed by mingling with current students (social relations and social networks), being treated like adults, with respect and trust (respect, dignity and recognition). Having a student card, and not having to wear school uniform also helped participants to feel like students. Participants’ sense of studenthood was also encouraged via delivery which was more akin to lectures and tutorials than their experience of Higher level work at school. This was the case even for those participants who had had the opportunity to study an Advanced Higher at school simultaneously. The capability approach implicitly relies on a conception of people as evolving and able to reflect upon their identities and individual development. Being able to reflect on who one is not something we are all immediately able to do but a capability people have reason to value (Davis and Wells, 2016).

The experiences of former Hub pupils have demonstrated that the formation of a student identity has been a central part of their transition from school to HE. Thus, any intervention which is successful in bringing about this internal transition at an earlier stage in the learner journey should be promoted. While there is some evidence from the U.S. for the efficacy of dual enrolment programmes, which seek to expose high school pupils to college or university to complete courses that carry credit for both high school and college or university (Wang Golann and Hughes, 2008), such examples are less common in the U.K.

Writing about the purpose of HE and the potential of the Capability Approach, Stephenson (1992) asserts that students need, ‘... real experience of being responsible and accountable for their own learning, within the rigorous, interactive, supportive and, for them, unfamiliar environment of HE’ (Stephenson, 1992:7). For Wilson-Strydom this means nurturing aspirations, building meaningful connections amongst students, and ‘actively harnessing the power of being agents who can act to bring about change in their lives’ (Wilson-Strydom, 2017b: 398). This, it is argued, in addition to providing fair access to Advanced Highers, is the transformational outcome of the model of the Hub.

## **8. Conclusion**

This paper **suggests** that a model based on immersing school pupils within the HE learning environment prior to entry can serve as an enabler for capability development and equitable transitions. The transformational impact of the experience on learners is evidenced in terms of their self-reported capabilities for practical reason about post-school choices; their

academic grounding in chosen university subjects and their ability to apply critical analysis skills to complex problems. Participants developed as independent learners. Their sense of belonging in HE was engendered via social relations and networks. Their maturity was developed from being treated with respect and recognised as HE learners, and their emotional health was supported within a learning environment which was friendly and supportive. The outcome of developing capabilities for HE was a transitional experience which was smoother and easier than it might otherwise have been. This was facilitated by a shift in learner identity from that of school 'pupil' to HE 'student.' The result was an achieved functioning as an HE student. To this extent, the immersive model in operation at the Hub can be seen not just to have widened participation to HE for learners from target schools; but to have advanced it. While the current study was relatively small in scale and generalisations should be cautioned, the findings highlight the imperative that schools and universities work in partnership to proactively develop and sustain key capabilities for HE prior to entry. This is especially important for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds many of whom are first-generation students.

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